

**Education Committee  
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

**House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support**

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Jodie Coleman-Marzialo from Tolland, CT. I work as a Special Education Paraeducator at Tolland High School in Tolland, CT. I offer the following testimony in support of House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators:

House Bill 6881 is a significant step to improve the work life and career path opportunities for Connecticut's paraeducators. With over 1,300 vacant paraeducator positions, our students may not be getting the services they are entitled to. This is a direct result of being paid some of the lowest wages in the State. With grocery stores and retail stores starting pay at over \$18 an hour, why would anyone want to work in a school for only \$15 an hour? That's why we need to be compensated adequately, have affordable health care, and participate in a retirement plan in order to survive in today's inflationary economy and fulfill a satisfying career in Education.

Paraeducators are the front-line workers to the next generation. The students of today are our next Senators and Representatives, and they need paraeducators that have the ability, dedication and knowledge to assist and prepare our students for the future. Whether it be to attend a college or university, trade school or apprenticeship, all students with learning disabilities need our help. The public schools need our help, parents need our help, and taxpayers need our help so they can find a doctor, a lawyer, a mechanic, and a plumber for generations to come.

As a Special Education Paraeducator for over 14 years, I have worked in every school in my district. The students I once supported in kindergarten I now support in high school. And I have noticed that being sent home 3 years ago to date on Friday, March 13th, 2020, due to a pandemic, has really impacted our students emotionally, mentally, physically, psychologically, and socially. There is less motivation to complete assignments, study for tests or do homework, and behaviors have increased significantly.

Daily I assist, instruct, and support students with learning disabilities in grades 9-12 starting my day with Geometry at 7:15 a.m. In one class, I support six students, some with behavior plans where I do my best to keep them all on track. During a recent test, emotions and pencils were flying and sometimes I felt like a verbal punching bag, but I understand there is a lot of information students have to remember. This is where de-escalation training would be helpful.

No doubt this is a challenging and difficult job for little pay with big responsibilities, but it is also rewarding. The success I have seen in the students that have broadened their interests in high school by taking classes that display their talents and uniqueness has inspired others. Many of these students I know better than the teachers who only see them for 1 period. That's why being a part of the Planning and Placement Team is so important for paraeducators.

I end my day working in Adobe Illustrator. Knowledge in this software will be an asset for all, giving our students innovative technology abilities for advancement. But many students struggle and need assistance. This is why proper software training and professional development, and access to IEPs and 504s is so important for paraeducators in order to provide the best learning experience for each individual student.

I agree that paraeducator contracts, negotiations, and pensions and/or retirement plans should match the teachers. With teachers paid according to college degree, paraeducators should mirror this as many of us with degrees are asked to be teachers for the day with no additional compensation. We work for the educational system and promote higher education but are not rewarded for our own additional education. This is why classifications and stipends for extra duties and responsibilities are necessary and long overdue. We are not all the same, but we are one group of experts.

I am proud to be a paraeducator because I know I make a difference. I give so many children the opportunity to learn and achieve their goals. It is rewarding to see their accomplishments as they grow, learn and graduate. Every child is a unique person who learns and retains information in different ways and at different levels. With the collaboration of paraeducators so many children get the extra assistance, encouragement, guidance, social/emotional, and instructional academic support they deserve and need in order to succeed in life. They are the future of this country.

While HB 6881 is a step in the right direction, it needs to go further to ensure that paraeducators are adequately compensated fairly and respectfully, especially in today's economy. This committee and all

members of the General Assembly need to hear our voices and take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower healthcare costs, and improve our retirement benefits.

Thank you for hearing my testimony and I urge every member of this committee to please support House Bill 6881.

Jodie Coleman-Marzialo

Special Education and ABA trained Paraeducator from Tolland, CT